CHAPTER-II
SYLHET-BENGAL REUNION MOVEMENT AND ASSAM MUSLIMS

2.1. Background (Beginning of the Movement):

Since its Annexation till 1873 Assam remained under the administrative jurisdiction of the huge Bengal Presidency which consisted of besides Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, United Provinces including Delhi, portion of Central Provinces and Chota Nagpur. Tagging of Assam with the Bengal Presidency which was already a huge one had created certain practical problems for the administrators—first, the ethnic diversities were irreconcilable; second, the Presidency was a huge one and a very big burden for the government from the administrative point of view, having an area of 1,90,000 Sq. Miles and a population of 62,335,217; and third, the European tea planters in Assam had "Unique Position" and they required special consideration. Besides, overgrowing importance of Calcutta, constantly increasing congestion of business in Calcutta Secretariat, inability of the head of the government to give personal attention to such a huge administrative unit, were the other factors which brought forth suggestions at different times for reorganisation of the Bengal Presidency.

Thus, the difficulty of administering the huge Bengal Presidency was being felt for quite some time and a decision had to be taken in the matter. In 1874, therefore, Assam was separated from Bengal Presidency and made a Chief Commissioner's Province under direct control of the Governor General in Council. The Governor General made the following proclamations in this regard:

First, the proclamation No. 379, dated February 6, 1874, stated that "with
the sanction and approbation of the Secretary of State for India", he was "pleased hereby to take under his immediate authority and management" the territories of the districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar, the adjoining districts of Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, Naga Hills, the plains portion of Cachar and the Bengal district of Goalpara; and 2nd, under proclamation No. 380 dated 7 February, 1874 the territories mentioned above were constituted "into a Chief Commissionership of Assam".

Though large in area the newly created Chief Commissionership of Assam was not considered viable as it had a small population and a meagre revenue potential. Therefore, for the sake of economic viability the Bengal district of Sylhet was taken away from Bengal Presidency under proclamation No. 2343 dated 12 September, 1874 and by Proclamation No. 2344 dated 12 September, 1874, attached the district to the Chief Commissionership of Assam.6

The reconstitution of Assam into a Chief Commissioner's Province by attaching the districts of Cachar, Goalpara and Sylhet- all Bengalee- majority areas -was a landmark in the history of Assam as it drastically altered the demographic, ethnic and linguistic profile of the state.7 On the one hand, the Muslim population of the state rose from a negligible 5.9 percent to 28.8 percent of the total population of the newly created province.8 On the other hand, the province became a Bengalee-majority unit owing to the fact that the population of Surma Valley alone exceeding that of the Brahmaputra Valley.9

The Muslim population in the Brahmaputra Valley accounted for only 5.9 per cent, but the joint Muslim population of Surma Valley and Goalpara accounting for 43 per cent, made the overall Muslim population percentage 28.8 per cent of the

total population. These two factors-first, the Province becoming Bengalee-Majority; and 2nd, significant growth in the Muslim population-were to play a very significant role in the politics of the Province in the years to come. In fact, these resulted in the ethnic and Valley conflicts and later on communal rivalry on Assamese- Bengali and also Hindu-Muslim lines, that marked the politics of the Province for many years to come. It is, therefore, observed, "from 1874 to 1947, the history of Assam was the history of Assamese-Bengalee, Brahmaputra Valley- Surma Valley and Hindu-Muslim conflicts."  

The amalgamation of the district of Sylhet which was ethnically, linguistically as well as socio-culturally an integral part of Bengal, was faced with strong opposition from the people of the district. They resented amalgamation with Assam and its people with whom they had no similarities-social or linguistic, and initiated a movement for reunion with Bengal. A memorial protesting against the transfer signed by a prominent Muslim leader of the of the district Hamid Bakht Mazumder on behalf of the inhabitants of the district of Sylhet was submitted to the Viceroy and Governor General on 10th August, 1874. The memorialists based their protest on "the long association of Sylhet with Bengal, the absence of sympathy between Sylhet and Assam, the disadvantage of being yoked with a backward people, and the apprehension that the district would enjoy laws and institutions inferior to those which it had been accustomed." The memorialists were informed in a letter from the Government of India dated the 5th September 1874, that their prayer for retention in Bengal could not be accepted but were assured that there would be

13. Kar (n.8) p.112; Also see the speech of Paresh Lal Shome Choudhury in the Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council (Hearinafter ALCP) in The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, Oct. 3, 1928, p. 731.  
15. Ibid.
no change whatever in the prevalent law and judicial procedure or in the principles of land settlement and collection of land revenue which applied throughout Bengal.\footnote{16} Thus, the Govt tried to remove the apprehension of the Sylhet people expressed in the memorial. The people of Sylhet however, were not satisfied and remained sullen.\footnote{17} The desire for reunion survived for many decades to come although nothing remarkable "was heard of the matter during next 31 years"\footnote{18} i.e., till 1905.

2.2. \textbf{Sylhet-Bengal Reunion Question in the Context of Partition of Bengal (1905) :}

The creation of the Chief Commissionership of Assam by incorporating the Bengal districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara is termed by some as "the first partition of Bengal".\footnote{19} The expanding and prospering economy of the Chief Commissionership prompted the colonial administrators to think of a further partition of Bengal and to transfer some more areas to Assam.\footnote{20} In 1896, William Ward, the outgoing Chief Commissioner of Assam suggested the transfer of Chittagong Division and two districts of Dacca and Mymensingh to Assam. Henry Cotton, the next Chief Commissioner (1896-1903) paid little attention to the scheme as he thought it would "excite a storm of protest."\footnote{21}

The Government of India also supported the viewpoint of the Chief Commissioner except for transferring the administration of Lushai Hills from Bengal Presidency to Assam in 1897.\footnote{22} In early 1903, J. B. Fuller, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal supported the earlier scheme of transferring Chittagong Division, Dacca and Mymensingh districts to Assam, and this was also supported by J. B. Fuller the next Chief Commissioner of Assam (1902-1905) on the ground of

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\item \footnote{16} Ibid.
\item \footnote{17} Nag, op.cit., p. 60.
\item \footnote{18} Assam Gazette (Part-VI), January 20, 1926, p. 51.
\item \footnote{19} J.B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, New Delhi, Radiant Publishers, 1977 p. 145.
\item \footnote{20} Nag, op.cit., p. 60.
\item \footnote{21} Ibid; also Barpujari, op.cit., p. 177.
\item \footnote{22} Barpujari, Loc.cit.
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facilitating speedy completion of Assam Bengal Railways.23 The scheme got the approval of Curzon's Government, and H. H. Risley, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department in a letter dated 3 December, 1903 justified the reorganisation as it would not only ease the excessive burden of the Government of Bengal but also facilitate the expansion of Assam by giving officers a wider and more interesting field of work and a maritime outlet in order to develop industries in tea, oil and coal.24

Besides the above economic motives and administrative convenience as stated by the Government as grounds for planning territorial reorganisation, it is observed that Lord Curzon had an ulterior object in view. He was very much apprehensive of the solidarity and growing political consciousness of the Bengalees and sought to destroy the "nascent nationalism in Bengal" by dividing the Bengali-speaking people on the basis of religion taking every advantage of the separatist tendencies of the Muhammadans of the province.25 Explaining Curzon's scheme R. C. Mazumder writes:

"In East Bengal, the Muslims, politically less advanced and more loyal to the British than the Hindus, would be in a majority, while in Bengal the Bengalees would from a minority by inclusion of Bihar and Orissa. Thus, the Bengalees would be divided from their kith and kin; the Bengalee Hindus hated and dreaded by Curzon for their advanced political ideas would form a minority; and a thin wedge would be driven between the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal." 26

The announcement of the scheme for partition was followed by prayers, protestations and demonstrations throughout the Province of Bengal. Many resolutions, telegrams and petitions protesting against the transfer were sent to the government.27

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23. Ibid; also Nag, op.cit.
25. Ibid.
26. R.C. Mazumder, History of Freedom Movement in India, VOL-ii, p. 5, Quoted in Ibid.(Please see Foot Note No:-9).
27. Barpujari, op.cit., p. 179.
In brief, a vigorous anti-partition agitation began in Bengal. The response to the movement in Assam was initially confined to those areas where Bengalee population was predominant. Not much enthusiasm was noticed among the Assamese people as it was essentially a Bengalee movement. Subsequently, however, the Assamese elite took an active part and the Assamese press and socio-political organisations strongly protested against the Plan, that too, for different reasons.\textsuperscript{28} To them, since British occupation, Assam failed to receive adequate attention of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal and this was remedied to a great extent by the separation of the province in 1874 under a Chief Commissioner under whom the province had made much headway.\textsuperscript{29} To tag the province once again to the much advanced districts of Bengal would "nullify the good that has been derived" at the hands of the Chief Commissioner. In that case "Assam proper will secure only a small fraction of the Chief Commissioner's attention, his very seat will be removed, and the people will have to meet a keen and unequable competition of highly educated, enterprising and advantageously situated districts, (because of) which they are not yet prepared for the same."\textsuperscript{30}

The Assam Association apprehended that under the scheme, "the historic name of Assam will be obliterated for ever, her language (will) suffer and the removal of the seat of the government to a place outside Assam proper and further away from the geographical centre will necessarily make her lose the amount of care and attention which it (has) at present received from the government".\textsuperscript{31} The local press in general felt that "the situation of Assam when amalgamated with the Sylhet district was bad enough, but when tied with the advanced parts of the country, the change was from frying pan to fire".\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Nag, op.cit., pp. 61-62. \\
\textsuperscript{29} Barpujari, Loc.cit. \\
\textsuperscript{30} Letter from Jagannath Barua, President, Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, dated 10 February, 1904, quoted in Ibid., p. 180. \\
\textsuperscript{31} Proceedings of the Assam Association, dated 14 February, 1904, quoted in Barpujari op.cit., p. 180. \\
\textsuperscript{32} Quoted in Ibid., p. 181.
Ignoring popular agitation and immense pressure, Lord Curzon was determined to carry out the scheme of partition and the new province of "Eastern Bengal and Assam" came into being on 16 October, 1905. The partition was considered to be a "Grave National Disaster" for the people of Bengal and 16 October, 1905 was observed as a day of "national mourning" all over the province. Streets of Calcutta were full of demonstrations, shops were closed and observance of protests began with bath in the Ganges, mass prayers and 'Rakhi Bandhan'.

The response in Assam in support of the movement was remarkable. In the Assam Valley, protest meetings were held at Dhubri, Gauripur, Goalpara, Gauhati, and Dibrugarh. In the Surma Valley, meetings were organized at Sylhet, Habiganj, Maulavi Bazar, Silchar, Karimganj and Badarpur. In both the Valleys, the protestations were marked by the attendance of the Hindus and Muhammadans as joint partners. The anniversary of the anti-partition day was observed on 16 October 1906, at several places of the Assam Valley such as Dhubri Goalpara, Dibrugarh and Gauhati and everywhere both the communities jointly participated. On the same day at Badarpur in the Surma Valley, the Hindus and the Muslims both observed 'Rakhi Bandhan' ceremony and both fasted for the whole day.

Certainly, the anti-partition movement in the Surma Valley turned into a popular movement based on Swadeshi, Boycott and National Education as in many parts of Bengal. In the Assam Valley, as stated earlier, the movement was mainly confined to the urban areas where Bengalee elements in population was predominant. When the movement touched alarming proportions in some areas of Eastern Bengal the Government apart from adopting stringent repressive measures resorted to the notorious policy of 'divide and rule'. The new administration openly favoured the Muslims and such a partisan attitude of the Government resulted in the estrangement.

33. Barpujari op.cit., p. 182.
34. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
of relationship between the two communities which led to communal riots in parts of Eastern Bengal.35

The Muhammadan population of both the Valleys at the initial stage of the agitation made common cause with the Hindus and joined the movement. Subsequently, however, owing to some factors such as- insistence on the observance of Hindu religious rites by the anti-partition leaders, incitement of Muslim leaders like Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, and pro-Muslim sympathy of the Government- the Muhammadans gradually began to drift apart from the movement and turned into pro-partitionists. The Muhammadan Defence Association of Calcutta and later the Muslim League (1906) played a significant role in mobilising Muslim support to the Government. The Anjuman-i-Islamia of Silchar sent delegates to attend a pro-partition meeting at Dacca on 16 October (1905) organised by the Provincial Muhammadan Association of Eastern Bengal and Assam. On the same day pro-partition meetings were also organised by a section of the Muhammadans at Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj, Sunamganj and Sylhet in response to the appeal of the Bengal Muslims. While asking the Muhammadans to consider the partition as a boon, the Association appealed to them not to join any agitation against the government.36

In the face of intense agitation in Bengal and the general sympathy all over the country, the Government had to announce annulment of partition in December 1911. As a result Assam was reverted to a Chief Commissionership with a Legislative Council at Shillong. It was a welcome relief to the Assamese people but the people of the Surma Valley, particularly those of Sylhet considered that a 'deep injury and wound' had been inflicted on the Bengali-speaking population by tagging them once again with the Assamese with whom they had no affinity.

35. Ibid., pp. 189-90.
36. Ibid., pp. 190-91.
whatever - geographical, ethnological and linguistic. The district was 'convulsed by an unparalleled agitation' demanding transfer of Sylhet to Bengal.37

As soon as the announcement of the dissolution of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was made in December, 1911, an agitation was immediately set on foot for the incorporation of Sylhet in Bengal in stead of in the reconstituted province of Assam.38 Babu Basanta Kumar Das, member of the Assam Legislative Council, informed the house in course of his speech during the debate on the Transfer of Sylhet in 1928, that immediately after the annulment of partition of Bengal, a meeting presided over by Khan Bahadur Syed Abdul Majid, was held at Sylhet on 31st December, 1911 in which a memorial on behalf of the people of Sylhet against transfer of the district to Assam was adopted.39 Another public meeting demanding separation of Sylhet from Assam was held at Sylhet on 15th April, 1912 under the Presidentship of the same person Syed Abdul Majid, who was at that time the president of Anjuman- i- Ismaia, Sylhet. A memorial protesting against the government action and demanding amalgamation of Sylhet with Bengal, and signed by all the members of the Legislative Council, both Hindus and Muslims, Zamidars and other influential persons of the district, was also submitted to Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy of India.40

2.3. First Sight of Hindu-Muslim Divide on the Sylhet-Bengal Reunion Issue:

Since 1874 to 1912, the Hindus and the Muslims of the district of Sylhet seemed to have fought jointly for the common cause of the transfer of the district to Bengal. However, in August, 1912 the first "dissentient voice was heard" from the Muslim Community against the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. It was reported

37. Ibid., pp. 204-05.
38. Government of Assam Letter No. (as in Foot Note.6) in The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January 20, 1926 (Appendix-A) p.5.
39. Please see the speech of Babu Basanta Kumar Das in ALCP, The Assam Gazette Part-VI, October 3, 1928, p. 809.
40. Barpujari, op.cit., p. 205.
41. Kar (n.8), p. 113.
that "a largely attended public meeting of Muhammadans convened in August, 1912 at the instance of the Anjuman- i- Islamia, Sylhet, and presided over by the President of the Anjuman, passed a unanimous resolution in favour of remaining in Assam." 42

Some of the prominent Muslims of the district who took an active part in the Reunion Movement gradually began to change their opinion on the issue. For instance, Syed Abdul Majid, who was hitherto a staunch supporter of Reunion, informed the Viceroy in a telegram on 5 August, 1912 that "over 15,000 Muslims meeting assembled yesterday representing the entire Muslim population, Sylhet district, earnestly pray retention of district in Assam" 43. Still the fact remained that many Muslims of the district continued to support the transfer in many years to come. But the government viewpoint was that the number of Muslims supporting the transfer at that time was small and even that small number was going to be smaller. The Chief Commissioner observed that the number of Muslims supporting the Hindus "is likely to become smaller if, as it seems probable, the formation of a provincial branch of the Muslim League is decided upon." 44 One may differ as to the exact number supporting or opposing the transfer but it is to be admitted that from 1912 onwards the number of Muslims supporting the transfer of Sylhet gradually decreased. The Government of Assam traced the divergence of opinion as expressed in the August, 1912 meeting "as the beginning of division among the Hindus and Muslims of the district" 45 on the question of Reunion of Sylhet with Bengal. Regarding the change of the Muslim opinion on the issue, several viewpoints have been expressed. It is observed that "the prospect of Muslims outnumbering Hindus in the province and the prevalent majority of the Muslims in the Surma Valley placing them in a privileged position made them

42. The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January, 20, 1926 p. 52.
43. Telegram from Syed Abdul Majid, 5 August, 1912, quoted in Barpujari op. cit., p. 206.
44. Quoted in Ibid.
45. Kar (n.8), p. 114.
change their stance."\(^{46}\) Another viewpoint is that although the change of opinion became expressed in 1912, it may be traced back to the Partition of Bengal and creation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905. According to this view, "since 1874, the Hindus and the Muslims of the district had been struggling unitedly for reunion with Bengal. But the carving out of the new province generated amongst the Muslims a political advantage based on numerical strength. Therefore, the communal unity of the earlier times received a psychological shock."\(^{47}\) Many other views were also expressed by the representatives of the Community in the coming years as reasons for the Muslim support to the retention of Sylhet in Assam. However, the main factor which inspired the Muslims towards changing the view is the passion for communal solidarity and communal interest, which became evident in the coming years from the views expressed by the representatives of the community within and outside the Legislative Council of Assam.

The Government from the very beginning was determined not to yield to the demand of the transfer of Sylhet for economic and political reasons. The Government viewpoint was that Sylhet was occupying a pre-dominant position and it had prospered exceedingly, and there was no guarantee that the district "would enjoy the same privilege under Bengal administration."\(^{48}\) Besides, it was feared that any modification in the existing boundaries would adversely affect the Muslims who were in the majority in the district and the tea-planting community which made significant contribution to the economic development of the district. The Government was also apprehensive of the fact that separation of Sylhet would open floodgates for similar movements in Cachar plains, Goalpara and Lushai Hills, upsetting the existing arrangements and destroying Hindu-Muslim ratio in the

\(^{46}\) Nag, op.cit., p. 62.
\(^{47}\) Kar (n.8), p. 32.
\(^{48}\) Government Correspondence, Reforms Department Proceedings, General Deposit, October 1920, No:-11, Arbuthnott to Chief Commissioner, 13 June, 1912, cited in Barpujari, op.cit., p. 206.
population of Bengal.\textsuperscript{49} The government was also not ready to touch the Hindu-Muslim population ratio in Bengal as it expressed, "In the newly constituted province of Bengal, the Muhammadans must remain in a position of approximate numerical equality with or possibly of small superiority over the Hindus."\textsuperscript{50} The Chief Commissioner was, therefore, advised by the Viceroy, to tell the agitators that "the Government of India have no intention of making any modification in the boundaries of Assam."\textsuperscript{51} In fact, the Government stand on the matter was well reflected in a statement of the Home Member, Government of India on 7th March, 1912, in which it was made clear that although various memorials supporting the transfer of Sylhet and others protesting against the proposal had been received from the residents of the district, it was not the intention of the Government to include Sylhet or any other Bengali-speaking areas in Bengal.\textsuperscript{52} The same stand of the Government was reiterated in 1913 by Mr. Reid, the Government representative in the Assam Legislative Council in reply to a question asked by Kamini Kumar Chanda regarding the inclusion of Sylhet in Bengal.\textsuperscript{53} After that the movement for reunion of Sylhet with Bengal is said to have subsided for some years.\textsuperscript{54}

\section*{2.4. Sylhet-Bengal Reunion Issue in the Context of Montague-Chelmsford Reforms Enquiry:}

The movement was revived in connection with the discussions regarding the proposed constitutional reforms.\textsuperscript{55} In fact, when Mr. Montague and Lord Chelmsford started their famous reform enquiry, the demand for reunion of Sylhet with Bengal

\textsuperscript{49} Based on Government Correspondence, Home Political -A, Calcutta Records, 1912, Earle to Hardinge, 31 July, 1912, Hardinge to Earle, 5 August, 1912, cited in Ibid., p. 206-07.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid; Hardinge to Earle, 28 August, 1912, quoted in Barpujari, op.cit, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{51} Quoted in Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} ALCP , in the Assam Gazette Part-VI, Shillong, Wednesday, March, 19, 1913.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January 20, 1926, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
The question of the transfer of Sylhet was also raised in the Indian Legislative Council on 6th February, 1918 by Kamini Kumar Chanda, the

56. Please see the speech of Syed Muhammad Saadulla in ALCP in Assam Gazette, Part-VI, October 3, 1928, p.796
58. The Assam Gazette Part-VI, January 20, 1926, p.52; Also see The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, October 3, 1928, p. 795
59. Please see the speech of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi in the ALCP, The Assam Gazette Part-VI, October 3, 1928 p. 803
60. Saadulla’s letter dated 20 July, 1925, in the Assam Gazette Part-VI, January 20, 1926, p.26
representative of Assam from the Surma Valley, in the form of a resolution, in course of a debate on the general subject of the adjustment of provincial boundaries.\textsuperscript{61} The resolution was said to have been opposed by the representatives of the Assam Valley.\textsuperscript{62} Although the resolution was lost in the Indian Legislative Council,\textsuperscript{63} the issue was also raised in the Bengal Legislative Council in the same year which passed a resolution recommending transfer of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara to Bengal.\textsuperscript{64} However, the Assamese intelligentsia opposed the transfer and such opposition was expressed in the Conference of the Assam Association at Goalpara on December 27-29, 1918 which adopted a resolution under the presidency of Tarun Ram Phookan, protesting against the transfer of Goalpara and Sylhet to Bengal.\textsuperscript{65} This is also described as the "first voice of opposition of the Assamese Hindus" against the transfer.\textsuperscript{66}

It is to be noted that till the talk of Reforms started the Assamese public by and large were sympathetic to the aspirations of the Sylhet people in their movement for Reunion as the former thought that the transfer of Sylhet would be a blessing in disguise for whenever the Assamese people made a demand for a University or a High Court, there invariably followed a counter claim from the Surma Valley, and this Valley conflict greatly hampered the progress of the state.\textsuperscript{67} However, they had a different view on the question of Goalpara which was always considered by them to be an integral part of Assam, and strongly opposed the demand for separation of Goalpara. But when the discussion on the proposed Montague-Chelmsford Reforms were in progress, the Assamese leadership changed their view on Sylhet and thereafter they opposed any disintegration whether

\textsuperscript{61} Barpujari, op.cit., pp-230-31; Also The Assam Gazette Part- VI, 20 January, 1926, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{62} Please see Saadulla’s speech in ALCP, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, October 3, 1928, p. 795.
\textsuperscript{63} Barpujari, op. cit., p.231.
\textsuperscript{64} Kar (n.8), p.114.
\textsuperscript{65} Barpujari, op. cit., P. 233.
\textsuperscript{66} Kar (no.8), p.115
\textsuperscript{67} Barpujari, pp.133-34; Such a viewpoint was expressed by Sadananda Dowerah in 1926 in moving a resolution in the Assam Legislative Council. Please see ALCP in The Assam Gazette, January 20, 1926. PP-18-19.
of Goalpara or Sylhet as they feared that it might adversely affect Assam's status in the proposed set of reforms.\(^{68}\) Although the division among the Sylhet Muslims on the issue was reported much earlier, many prominent Muslims of the district till that time were said to have strongly espoused the cause of the transfer of the district to Bengal.\(^{69}\)

The Government of India commented on the matter in paragraph- 13 of their Ninth Despatch, and agreed with the view expressed in paragraph-246 of the report of Indian Constitutional Reforms that "redistributions of provisional areas should not be imposed by official action, and should follow rather than either precede or accompany reform."\(^{70}\) In fact, the Government was not ready to effect any changes in territories of the provinces of Assam and Bengal at that time because the agitation following partition of Bengal (1905) made them very much cautious in matters of territorial redistribution.\(^{71}\) The people of Sylhet were not satisfied with the Government decision and "meetings in favour of Reunion were then organised".\(^{72}\) At a public meeting held at Sylhet Town Hall on 29 October, 1919, Kamini Kumar Chanda appealed to the people of Sylhet to continue their agitation till the object was attained. Abdul Karim, a member of the Bengal Council, also supported the cause. At the end, a resolution was passed recommending the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal in order to give the people of the district a fair chance of working under the liberal scheme of reforms.\(^{73}\)

Meanwhile, the Sylhet- Bengal Reunion League which is said to have been formed after the annulment of partition with prominent leaders and Zamindars of Sylhet like Brojendra Narayan Choudhury, Girish Chanda Nag, Ramini Mohan Das, Syed Abdul Majid, Khan Bahadur Bakht Mazumder, Khan Bahadur Aladdin

\(^{68}\) Barpujari, Loc. cit.
\(^{69}\) Kar (no.8), p.115.
\(^{70}\) The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January 20, 1926, p.52.
\(^{71}\) Please see the speech of Nobin Chandra Bardoloi in ALCP, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 30 October, 1928 p. 804.
\(^{72}\) The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January 20, 1926, p. 52.
Ahmed Choudhury and others, spearheaded the movement. In 1920, the Sylhet Bengal Reunion League decided that a deputation should address the Viceroy at his forthcoming visit to Assam. But the Surma Valley Conference adopted Non Co-operation and resolved that no address should be presented to the Viceroy. As a result, the proposed delegation was cancelled and the League dissolved. In fact the leaders of the League were also the leaders of the Surma Valley Conference and therefore, the decision of the Conference implied the decision of the League at that point of time. Basanta Kumar Das, informed the Assam Council in 1928 that although the League was dissolved in 1920, a Standing Committee of it was authorised to carry forward the movement. After passing of the Government of India Act, 1919, a pamphlet, was circulated in Sylhet expressing the apprehension that unless the district is transferred to Bengal, the permanent settlement would be abolished and its connection with the Calcutta High Court and Calcutta University would be snapped. However, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, issued on the authority of the Government of India, a Communique in 1921, giving an unqualified assurance that the permanent settlement and other advantages enjoyed by Sylhet would remain ever inviolable.

In this way the Movement for Reunion of Sylhet with Bengal petered away

74. Bhattacharjee, op. cit., p.263; Kar (no.8) p.113; Tanmoy Bhattacharjee, Sylhet Referendum- A Study in Retrospect, (Published by the author) Silchar, September, 2006. p. 69; Also see the Speech of Basanta Kumar Das in the Council in ALCP, Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 3 October, 1928. p. 809.

A Confusion persists regarding the year of the formation of the Sylhet Bengal Reunion League. Some authors consider 1920 as the year of formation of the League (See Nag. op.cit., p.63) while some others as already referred, consider it to have been formed after annulment of Partition of Bengal. However, these views seems to be uncorroborated to an extent as no reference of the League is found in connection with the movement till 1918. On the other hand, the year of 1920 is not tenable as the year of formation as reference of a letter addressed to the Secretary of the League dated February, 1918 was made in course of discussion in the Assam Council on the motion of Brajendra Narayan Choudhury in 1924 (Kar, n.8, p. 119). Thus it can neither be confirmed that the League was formed immediately after the annulment of partition nor is it acceptable that it was formed in 1920. The most acceptable view as per available sources is that it might have been formed some time in early 1918. (Please see The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January 20, 1926, p. 52. Also see Barpujari op.cit. pp. 230-31).

76. Kar(n.8), pp. 115.
78. Kar (n.8), pp. 115-16.
for the time being as the Government of India was not ready to effect "any redistribution of territory or modification of boundary of Assam on the eve of the reforms".\(^{79}\) From that time onwards the issue was fought more on the floor the Assam Legislative Council.

2.4. **Sylhet Transfer Issue in the Assam Council (Debate on Brajendra Narayan Choudhury's Resolution):**

The question of the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal was not raised during the life-time of the first reformed Assam Legislative Council. In the second Council, it was brought up by one of the leaders of the Nationalist party (Swarajist Party) in the shape of a resolution.\(^{80}\) In fact, the resolution was moved in the July session of the Council by Brajendra Narayan Choudhury of the Surma Valley who was also the Deputy Leader of the Swarajist Party. In moving the resolution he said, "I need not point out that the transfer of Sylhet from this administration to Bengal is the chief concern of the representatives of Sylhet. Indeed, it is their only politics."\(^{81}\) Elaborating the reasons for demanding Sylhet's separation he stated, "we have enough of communal differences that are baffling all efforts of administration and politicians to reconcile. To that let us not add another set of difference between the two Valleys by keeping them together since those natural differences we can not eliminate. Let us avoid that undignified spectacle of wrangling over every matter on racial and Valley-lines".\(^{82}\) He pointed out that the people of the two valleys of the province had failed to evolve a common attitude of action in different matters of public interest. He termed the continuance of the people of different taste and temperament as a "three lagged race" in which no progress of the province was possible. He also referred to some of the major issues which characterized the

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81. Ibid., August 13, 1924.
82. Ibid.
Valley question such as jealousy and rivalry over appointment to public services, establishment of a University in the province etc. He opined that so long as Sylhet remained in Assam, it would stand in the way of latter's progress. It would be like Assam's legacy of being bound to an "unwilling rebellious partner" which would always obstruct "Assam's peace, prosperity and progress". 83

The resolution moved by Brajendra Narayan Choudhury for the transfer of Sylhet was supported by many members from both the valleys including Hindu as well as Muslim members although the Muslim opinion was not unanimous. The Assamese members like Rohini Kanta Hati Barua, Tara Prasad Chaliha and Nilmoni Phukan supported the resolution. Hati Barua opined that it was not possible for the Assamese people to unite themselves "into a nation with the Sylhetees". Tara Prasad Chaliha felt that Assam's case for self-government would be somewhat endangered if Sylhet was separated but looking into the strong sentiment of the Sylhet people in favour of the transfer he supported the resolution. Nilmoni Phukan supported the resolution as he believed that Sylhet belonged to Bengal but he was opposed to transfer of Cachar. 84

The Surma Valley Muslim Members were divided on the issue of transfer of Sylhet. Abdul Hamid, a Sylhet member, supported Choudhury's resolution as he felt that the interest of the Sylhet Muslims would get due weightage more in Bengal than in Assam where their representatives would be in a minority. 85 Another Sylhet member Mudabbir Hussain Choudhury said that the resolution aimed at recognition of the principle of self-determination and therefore, there could be no objection if the Sylhet people wanted to go to Bengal. Regarding the opinion of the people, he asserted that both the landlords and the 'ryots' of Sylhet considered their interest secure in Bengal, as there the permanent settlement would remain intact and also

83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
the Tenancy Act would protect the 'ryots'.

Khan Bahadur Alauddin Ahmed Choudhury of Sylhet confessed that long ago he was a supporter of transfer but the facts and figures furnished by the Chief Commissioner of Assam changed his view in 1920. He was convinced that if Sylhet was transferred, the status of Assam would be adversely affected. Besides, he thought that no genuine demand came from Bengal for inclusion of Sylhet in Bengal. He, therefore, stood to oppose the resolution. Rashid Ali Laskar, the Muslim member from Cachar also opposed the resolution on the ground of uncertainty of Bengal accepting transfer and also the advantage of remaining in Assam such as opportunity of employment, virgin forests, culturable wastes, etc. He also opined that if sentiment was to be ground for separation then the sentiment should be practical and should have included Cachar and Goalpara on linguistic and geographical grounds.

However, the Cachar Hindu members demanded separation of Cachar along with Sylhet as they felt that they would be in a disadvantageous position if Sylhet went leaving Cachar in Assam. In fact, there was no mention of Cachar in the resolution which sought only separation of Sylhet. Subsequently, however, an amendment was moved by one of the Cachar members to add "and Cachar" along with Sylhet in the resolution. After being amended so as to recommend the transfer of Cachar as well as of Sylhet, the resolution was finally carried by 22 votes to 18. The result of the voting on the motion revealed that while the Hindu members of both the Valleys supported the transfer, the Muslim members were divided on the issue. Of the 22 supporters, five were Muslims and of the 18

86. Ibid.
87. Ibid; Basanta Kumar Das informed the House in 1928 that after meeting Nicholos Beatson Bell, the Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1920, "the Rai Bahadurs and Khan Bahadurs", who were the members of the Sylhet Bengal Reunion League "expressed their unwillingness to continue in the League." Please see for details ALCP, The Assam Gazette Part-VI, October 3, 1928 pp. 809-10.
88. ALCP in The Assam Gazette, Part-VI-A, August 13, 1924 (Debate on the motion).
89. Ibid.
90. Such disadvantages of remaining in Assam without Sylhet were outlined by Bepin Chandra Deb Laskar in 1926. Please see ALCP in The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 20 January, 1926, p. 114.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
opponents 6 were Muslims including two Ministers- Saadulla and Kutub Uddin Ahmed. Of the six Muslim opponents, three were from the Surma Valley and remaining three from the other Valley. All the 5 Muslim supporters of the resolution were from the Surma Valley. 93

Thus, the Muslim opinion in the Surma Valley was found to be divided on the question of transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. It was stated that there was so much difference of opinion between the Hindus and the Muslims on the issue that the Surma Valley Political Conference sitting at Sunamganj in August, 1924 in the district of Sylhet, found it necessary to omit from its agenda a resolution advocating reunion with Bengal. 94 According to the official sources, the Hindus at the conference made a deal with the Muslims that the former would not pass a resolution favouring reunion of Sylhet with Bengal and the latter would not hold a special meeting of the Muslim Conference to oppose the same. 95 The accuracy of the official reports may be doubted but from all these it may be stated for certain that at that point of time there was at least a section of the Muslims who where opposed to the reunion move.

2.5. Government's Position on the Sylhet Transfer Issue:-

In a letter dated 30th October 1924, the Government of Assam, informed the Government of India about the latest developments in connection with the Sylhet transfer issue with special reference to the passing of a resolution recommending transfer of Sylhet and Cachar in the Assam Legislative Council in July, 1924. The Government of Assam at the outset gave a brief outline of the movement for the reunion of Sylhet with Bengal from 1874 to 1924 i.e. till the passing of the resolution. It was stated in the letter that while mass of the

93. Ibid., 1924, p. 619; Also Kar(n.8), pp. 121, 137.
population of Sylhet were indifferent in the matter, it was probable that the majority of the educated Hindus were in favour of the transfer of the district to Bengal while a substantial body, probably the majority of the Muhammadan opinion was opposed to it. As a support of the claim of the Muslim opposition, the meeting of the Anjuman-i-Islamia opposing the transfer in August, 1912 and the omitting of the issue of transfer from the Agenda of the Surma Valley Political Conference in August, 1924, as already stated, were cited. Besides, it was informed that the resolution was supported only by those Muhammadans who were the members of the Nationalist Party while the Hindu members of the same as well as the independent Hindus supported it. Regarding the transfer of Cachar, it was stated that Cachar was not there in the original resolution but added at a late stage of the debate by means of an amendment. The opinion of the Cachar people as stated, the educated Bengali-speaking Hindus of Cachar while not strongly in favour of absorption in Bengal, would desire to remain associated with Sylhet whether Sylhet continues to be in Assam or transferred to Bengal. It was also admitted that no reliable information on the opinion of other sections of the Cachar people was available at that point of time. At the end, the Government expressed doubt whether Assam could retain the status of a Governor's province if its areas and population were materially curtailed, as a result of the transfer of Sylhet and Cachar. It was recommended that further enquiry would have to be made before any action is taken in that matter.  

2.6. Climate of Opinion - Attempt at Ascertaining Wishes of the People:

The following year i.e. the year 1925 witnessed an attempt on the part of the Government of Assam at ascertaining the views of the Sylhet and Cachar people
through official channels as per the "instructions of the Government of India". The Deputy Commissioners of Sylhet and Cachar were instructed to ascertain the real wishes of the people through the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hills Division who submitted his report, on the basis of the report of the Deputy Commissioners of the two districts, to the Chief Secretary Assam in a letter dated 27 June 1925.  

In his letter dated 24 June 1925, the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet expressed his inability to ascertain the "real wishes of the people" on the question of Sylhet-Bengal Reunion as more than 75% of the population of the district were agriculturists whose opinions "would be those of their landlords or the latest orator at village meeting." With very exceptions, the educated and influential Hindus were strongly in favour of the movement to Bengal. The educated Muhammadan opinion, according to him, was more divided. The Anjuman Islamias of Karimganj and Sunamganj were against the transfer, while that of Habiganj was in favour of it. Of the two Anjumans of Sylhet Sadr, one was in favour of the transfer while the view of the other was not known. However, there were sharp differences of opinion in Sylhet Sadr on the issue. The Tea Garden Managers expressed that they would prefer to stay in Assam. Regarding the opinion of the Cachar people, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar in a letter dated 25 June 1925, stated that although it was impossible at that point of time to gauge the real wishes of majority of the people, the wishes of the enlightened members of different communities could be gauged. The majority among the Bengali-speaking people appeared to be in favour of going to Bengal although there was an element of opposition. In fact, they wanted to remain attached with Sylhet. All other

97. Ibid.
98. Ibid; For details on the correspondence between the Government of India and Government of Assam, and Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hills Division as well as the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioners of Sylhet, Cachar and other concerned - Please see The Assam Gazette Part-VI, January 20, 1926, pp. 47-74.
99. Letter No:- 5451R, Dated Sylhet, the 24th June, 1926, From the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Division, Ibid., p. 62.
communities like Mahishya, Barman and Planters were strongly against transfer. It was also stated that provided Sylhet was not transferred a large majority of the population of the district would prefer to remain in Assam. In other words, "a large majority of the population of Cachar would prefer that both Sylhet and Cachar should remain in the province of Assam". The question of transfer of Sylhet was closely connected with the Jaintia Parganas. Maulavi Sikandar Ali Khandker, member, North Sylhet Local Board, from Jaintia, in a letter dated 19th June, 1925 informed that the people of Jaintia were quite unwilling to be incorporated with the Presidency of Bengal. He appealed to the Government on behalf of the people of Jaintia to incorporate Jaintia into the province of Assam, in case of transfer of Sylhet. In his letter dated 27th June 1925, the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Division, almost reiterated the views expressed by the Deputy Commissioners of Sylhet and Cachar. He opined that the great bulk of the people of the district of Sylhet had "no wishes" at all on the issue of the transfer of Sylhet for the reason explained by the Sylhet Deputy Commissioner in his letter. So, the information regarding the wishes of the people would relate to the wishes of those who have "real wishes" in the matter. He stated that the great majority but not all the Hindus were in favour of reunion and the great majority but not all the Muhammadans against it, but very few specially among the Hindus, could give any reason for their preference, except the sentimental reasons. The great bulk of the educated Hindus, according to him, was strongly in favour of transfer, while several of the Chief old Muhammadan Zamindari families were quite bitter against the same. Regarding the opinion of the Cachar people he stated that provided Sylhet and Cachar were not divided, "the majority would prefer to remain as they are."  

The general view of the Brahmaputra Valley Muslims on the matter got

100. Letter from the Deputy Commissioner, Cachar, No. 1909 G, dated Silchar, the 25th June, 1925, to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Division, Ibid., p. 63.
102. Letter from the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Division, No.237T dated 27th June, 1925, to the Chief Secretary, Assam, Ibid. p. 61.
reflected in the opinion of Syed Muhammad Saadulla, a Minister since 1924, and probably the most prominent Muslim leader of the Brahmaputra Valley. In a note to the Chief Secretary, Assam dated 20th July, 1925, he wrote: "Although some persons in the Brahmaputra Valley seem to think that the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal will be a good riddance, in view of it being a deficit district, but a long view of the matter will convince them that it will not be an unmixed blessing."\(^{103}\) This is because Assam with the Brahmaputra Valley alone, might lose its existing status. He also expressed apprehension that "once the principle of linguistic and revenue settlement affinity" is conceded, "there will be no logic to oppose the transfer of Goalpara as well."\(^{104}\) He then added, if Cachar goes along with Sylhet then "the Lushai Hills should also go for otherwise, there will be no way to the Lushai Hills, but through Cachar, a Bengal district."\(^{105}\) He then dealt with the most important question and stated that the transfer of Sylhet would spell disaster to the Muslims of both the Valleys for the Assam Valley Muslims, the "power of number will be gone and with that the proportionate share of representation in the local self-government institutions and services will dwindle to an enormous extent."\(^{106}\) The Surma Valley Muslims, he observed, were enjoying a dominating position in Assam on account of their preponderance and they could hardly expect to play such a role in the Bengal Presidency. He also informed that the Gauhati and Jorhat branches of the Anjuman-i-Islamia expressed their opposition to the transfer of Sylhet and if the transfer was effected, they recommended that the Assam Valley should also be transferred. In concluding the note he wrote that he still adhered to the view he expressed before Montague and Lord Chelmsford, at the time of enquiry Reforms, that Sylhet should not be transferred but if the district is transferred then the Assam Valley should also be transferred.

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\(^{103}\) Saadulla's Note to the Chief Secretary, Assam, dated 20th July, 1925. Ibid., pp. 59-60.
\(^{104}\) Ibid.
\(^{105}\) Ibid.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
subject to the provision that the Assam Valley districts are kept intact and the privileges obtained in Assam be continued in Bengal for the preservation of the Assamese nationality, culture and language which is quite distinct from that of Bengal."\textsuperscript{107}

In another note to the Chief Secretary, Assam dated 27th July, 1925 Sadulla wrote that he consulted a large number of Hindus and Muslims on his visit to Sylhet and found that the opinion in the district was sharply divided. He observed that Majority of the Muslims were against going to Bengal while majority of the educated Hindus were in favour of the proposal. As the opinion on the issue was divided he held that the Government should not disturb the status quo.\textsuperscript{108}

In a letter dated 11th August, 1925, the Assam Chief Secretary informed the Government of India that the issue of the transfer of Sylhet "has been extensively discussed in the press and on the platform," and "the bulk of the educated Hindu opinion in the district favours reunion with Bengal." He also stated that such desire for reunion was admitted based on sentiment as he wrote; "The Bengali Hindu of Sylhet feels that he is looked down upon by his brothers in Bengal owing to his being included in a province inhabited by semi-civilised tribes and by the Assamese whom he considers to belong to a lower standard of civilisation as he does." On the other hand, "The Leading Hindus of Assam Valley if they do not actively dislike the Hindus of Sylhet at least disown any kinship with them and regard them with certain feeling of jealousy." He admitted that although the fact that the administration of Sylhet was carried on at a loss, gave the Assamese Hindus an additional reason for demanding separation of the district, it was in the main the feeling of jealousy that led the Assam Valley members to support the resolution adopted in July, 1924.\textsuperscript{109}

Regarding the Muhammadan opinion, the Chief Secretary stated, it was far

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Saadulla's Note to the Chief Secretary, Dated 27th July, 1925, Ibid., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{109} Letter from the Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, No. 1573-POL- 3860-A.P., Dated Shillong, the 11th August, 1925, Ibid., pp. 54-57.
from being unanimous. A considerable body of Muhammadan opinion, according to him, was against the transfer, holding that this would be "detrimental to the interests of their community." However, certain thoughtful members of the community were not opposed to the reunion move as they looked ahead with some apprehension to the time when a Swaraj Government would be established in Bengal and felt that their Community in Bengal should be strengthened by addition of the Muslims of Sylhet. The opposite view he stated, was expressed in the notes of Saadulla who spoke with authority for the Muhammadans of the Assam Valley, and voiced their apprehension that with the Muhammadans of Sylhet taken away, their Community would be so numerically weak and unimportant as to be unable to claim the favourable treatment which it received under the existing arrangement i.e. Sylhet remaining in Assam. It was also observed that Saadulla found favourable support for his views among the Muslims of Sylhet.\footnote{110} It is noticeable here that in both cases of supporting and opposing the transfer of Sylhet, the Muhammadans, as per government report, were mainly guided by their communal interest.

The question of Transfer of Cachar, the Chief Secretary observed, "is hardly a practical proposition" as he opined, "The Bengalis now inhabiting the district of Cachar, while forming the majority of the population, are mere settlers there and can hardly claim that they have annexed the district and have right to demand its transfer to Bengal. Arguments based solely on numerical strength and linguistic affinity if admitted would, at the present rate at which immigration from Mymensing into several districts of the Assam Valley is going on, entitle the Bengali settlers in these districts after a few years to assert that they were in the majority and that therefore the districts in which they had settled should go to Bengal."\footnote{111} According to him, the resolution for the transfer of Sylhet and Cachar was carried with the support of the Assam Valley members. Although the case of Cachar was not really

\footnote{110. Ibid.}
\footnote{111. Ibid.}
discussed, the Assamese members still supported its transfer along with Sylhet as according to him, "they were so anxious to get rid of Sylhet and the Sylhetis that they were prepared to let Cachar go as well if that was the only way of getting rid of Sylhet."\footnote{112} He also informed that several of the members who supported the resolution, later on admitted that they made a mistake about Cachar.\footnote{113}

He also made the stand of the Government of Assam clear on the issue as he stated in Para-11 of his letter: "If therefore the Government of India hold that the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal necessitates a change in the status of Assam as a Governor's province, the Governor-in-Council must unhesitatingly oppose the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal." If, however, he added, "Assam without Sylhet were allowed to retain its present political status and privileges, his Excellency-in-Council would not, as already stated, feel justified in opposing the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal."\footnote{114} To put it simply, the Government of Assam was not opposed to the transfer if Assam's status as a Governor's province was not changed by such transfer.

In its letter to the Chief secretary of Assam, dated 24th October, 1925, the Government of India observed that the issue of transfer of the district of Cachar should not complicate the main issue of transfer of Sylhet as the Government was of the opinion that Cachar was "an essentially Assam district"\footnote{115} with close and inseparable connection with the Lushai Hills. The Government also declined to give any assurance regarding Assam's future status in case of transfer of Sylhet but observed that as "any change in the future status of Assam would probably involve an Amendment of the Government of India Act, and therefore for some time at any rate Assam would remain a Governor's province".\footnote{116} It was also stated that "the future status of Assam is a separate question which must be left an open

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{112} Ibid.
\item \footnote{113} Ibid.
\item \footnote{114} Ibid.
\item \footnote{115} Letter from H. Tonkinson, Joint Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, No. F. 81-25- Public, dated, Simla, the 24th October, 1925, Ibid., pp. 49-51.
\item \footnote{116} Ibid.
\end{itemize}}
question to be decided on the merits after any transfer is made". The Government, however, seemed to be uncertain about the future status of the province in case of the transfer of Sylhet as it stated that it was not possible to guarantee at that point of time whether the Government "would be able to support the continuance of Assam as a Governor's Province after its population has been reduced by some 33 per centum." The Government wanted the matter to be discussed again in the Assam Legislative Council as early as possible after publication of this letter along with other relevant papers so that the members get sufficient opportunity of studying the papers, and also requested the Assam Government to submit its final view on the matter "after discussion in the Assam Legislative Council which should be arranged to take place on an early date."

2.7. **Debate on the Motion of Sadananda Dowerah on the Sylhet Transfer Issue:**

Accordingly, a special session of the Assam Legislative Council was summoned on 6th January, 1926 to discuss the matter. This time a resolution was moved by Rai Bahadur Sadananda Dowerah, a Brahmaputra Valley leader of the Nationalist Party. The resolution as amended by Promode Chandra Dutta read as under-

a) The district of Sylhet be transferred to Bengal,

b) While it is not the intention of the Council to prejudice the transfer of Sylhet by any consideration as to the status of the rest of the province, Assam should not by reason of the transfer be deprived of any political privileges which it at present enjoys in common with other Governor's provinces or which might be hereafter extended to other Governor's provinces.120

In moving the resolution Dowerah opined that with the transfer of Sylhet the

117. Ibid.
118. Ibid.
119. Ibid.
120. Please see the Original Resolution in ALCP in the Assam Gazette Part- VI January 20, 1926.p. 18 and the amendment of P.C. Datta in Ibid., pp.29-30.
people of Assam would not be the losers but rather gainers. To him, the proceedings of the first Council were "sickening record of rivalry of claims of the two Valleys" and whenever there was a question whether a certain institution was to be located at Gauhati or at Sylhet came in and ultimately all such questions had to be dropped. He therefore, observed, "with Sylhet in Assam there will be no policy, and unless there is a fixed policy there cannot be any progress."  

The Hindu members in general of both the Valleys, as in 1924, except those of Cachar, supported the resolution. The Muslim members although divided on the issue, some of them expressed strong opposition to the resolution. Dewan Muhammad Wasil Choudhury of Sylhet opposed the resolution and said that Sylhet, after its merger with Assam, since 1874, made rapid strides in all fields. He also believed that such progress and prosperity of the district would be seriously disturbed if it was reunited with Bengal. Regarding the view that the desire for reunion with Bengal was a general one, he stated that it was never the case as the Muhammadan Community since 1874 was against the reunion.

2.7.A. **Views of Muslim Members:**

Saadulla, opposing the motion stated that if Sylhet was allowed to go, it would not be possible to reject the claims of Goalpara and Cachar to go to Bengal, and if that happened the population of Assam would be so reduced that it would be very difficult for the state to continue as a Governor's Province as the Government had already declared that it was unsure of the future status of the

121. ALCP in Ibid., pp. 18-19.
122. For Instance, he cited that in 1874 Sylhet had only 1 high school, about 6 or 7 middle schools and 100 primary schools but in 1926, there were 17 high schools, 70 middle schools and 1300 primary schools. For details on these comparisons in different fields please see the speech of Dewan Wasil Choudhury in ALCP in The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, January 20, 1926, pp. 27-28.
123. Ibid.
province after its population had been reduced to 33% with the transfer of Sylhet.\textsuperscript{124} Then he spoke from the Muslim point of view regarding the transfer of Sylhet. According to him, the Muslims, although were minority in the state, constituted about one-third of the total population and could attain to be a telling minority as combined with any single party in the Council they could turn the balance in any direction they liked. Citing the figures he showed that in the Assam Valley the Muslims constituted one-fourth of the population and of that a great majority were from Goalpara and in case Goalpara went away after the transfer of Sylhet the Muslim population would be reduced to one-tenth of the population of the State.\textsuperscript{125} He also addressed the Sylhet members by saying that they would not make any significant but a very negligible contribution to the Muslim population of Bengal as with the transfer of Sylhet the Muhammadan population of Bengal would be increased from 52.5\% to 53\% only.\textsuperscript{126} He, therefore, requested the Muhammadan members to seriously consider the matter as the transfer of Sylhet would leave the Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley in an utterly disadvantageous position. He appealed to the Sylhet members in particular to consider "whether it will be the brotherly feeling which is inculcated in our Holy Book, to leave us in such a helpless position in this Valley and not to care a jot for us."\textsuperscript{127}

Rashid Ali Laskar, a Cachar member also opposed the resolution as according to him, the Cachar people did not want to be united with Bengal nor did they want to be separated from Sylhet, they being the descendants of Sylhet. They would prefer to remain here in Assam. If, however, Sylhet was to go Bengal the

\textsuperscript{124} Please see Saadulla's speech in the Assam Legislative Council in the ALCP, in Ibid, pp. 40-42. Based on the Census Figure of 1921, he stated that of the total 76 Lakhs population of the Province, 25, 41, 341 were that of Sylhet, 13 Lakhs of Goalpara and Cachar together.

\textsuperscript{125} Based on 1921 Census figures. There were 10,99,745 Hindus against 14,33,390 Muhammadans in Sylhet. In the Assam valley, there were 26,48,932 Hindus against 5,94,951 Muhammadans of whom 3,16,490 were from Goalpara alone. For details please see Saadulla's speech in Ibid., p. 43.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
Cachar people would also want to go Bengal. He also contradicted the view that historically Cachar was a part of Assam.  

Alauddin Ahmed Choudhury, a Sylhet member also rose to oppose the resolution mainly on the ground that majority of the people of Sylhet, according to him, were not willing to be united with Bengal. He also read some letters sent to him by both the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet written in English as well as in Bengali, opposing transfer of the district to Bengal. In one such letter written by Sayed Rehan Uddin Hussain and Zohi Alam Choudhury, dated 28th December, 1925, as quoted by him, it was expressed that if the Muhammadans of the Surma Valley or even that of Sylhet were to go away, the Muhammadans of the Assam Valley would be in a minority and would lose the strong position they now hold. The Muhammadans of the Assam Valley also said to have realised the danger. Choudhury also stated that the share enjoyed by the Muhammadan Community of the Assam Valley in the Government position including Ministers, was due to the numerical strength contributed by the Surma Valley Muhammadans and this privilege would be gone with the transfer Sylhet.

Mafiz Uddin Ahmed, an Assam Valley member, in opposing the resolution informed the house that he had been told by several respectable members of the Surma Valley that they did not want to be reunited with Bengal. He also requested the Muhammadan members of the Surma Valley to seriously consider the condition of the Assam Valley Muhammadan members who would be in a hopeless minority if Sylhet goes, finding no pride in the province.

Unlike Saadulla and some other members of the Muhammadan Community opposing the resolution, Faiznur Ali, a Brahmaputra Valley member, supported it.

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128. Please see the Speech of Maulavi Rashid Ali Laskar in Ibid. pp. 84-86.
130. For details on these letters please see the speech of Alauddin Ahmed Choudhury in Ibid., pp. 86-91.
131. Ibid.
132. Ibid.
133. The speech of Maulavi Mafizuddin Ahmed in Ibid., p. 102.
saying that out of seven Sylhet members only one was against the transfer of Sylhet. He also believed that the Muhammadans of the Brahmaputra Valley would not lose their status with the transfer of Sylhet as he observed "the status of a Community within a nation does not depend upon its numerical strength but upon its political importance." 134

2.7.B. Cachar Hindu Members' Opposition of the Motion:

The Cachar Hindu members also expressed dissatisfaction with the resolution as Cachar was not included in the resolution. In fact, the Cachar representatives had always been of the opinion, as referred earlier, that Cachar should not be separated from Sylhet. Bepin Chandra Deb Laskar of Cachar, in opposing the resolution tried to show the insincerity of the Sylhet members in the matter of taking Cachar along with Sylhet in Bengal. He told the Council that Akhil Chandra Dutta had proposed the transfer of Sylhet alone in the Bengal Council on the advice of the Sylhet leaders. In the Indian Legislative Council also Kamini Kumar Chanda proposed the Reunion of Sylhet alone, as according to Sri Laskar, Chanda, although a Cachar representative was a man from Sylhet, and did not want Cachar to go. He also informed the Council that in 1924, Cachar was not included in the original resolution, but was added later on to secure votes of the Cachar members. In brief, he opposed the resolution as he did not want Sylhet to be separated from Cachar, and was also sure that no Cachar member would support the resolution. 135 Finally, after prolong debate, the matter was put to vote and the resolution was carried by 26 votes to 12. All the Hindu members except two from Cachar viz Bepin Chandra Deb Laskar and Har Kishore Chakrabatti, voted for the motion. The Muslim members were divided, once again, and out of ten Muslim members participating in the voting from both the Valleys four voted in favour and

134. Faiznur Ali's speech in Ibid., p. 113.
135. For details please see Bepin Chandra Deb Laskar's speech (in Bengali) in the Council, in Ibid., pp. 113-115.
six voted against the resolution. The two Hindu members from Cachar voted against the motion for the reason already stated.136

On 23rd February, 1926, another resolution recommending transfer of Cachar excluding North Cachar Hills along with Sylhet, to Bengal was moved by Rashid Ali Laskar, a Cachar Muslim representative. His main contention was that Cachar wanted to remain with Sylhet, preferably in Assam, as he earlier stated, but as it seemed that Sylhet did not want to remain in Assam, so Cachar wanted to go with Sylhet wherever the latter wanted to go. The resolution was opposed by Faiznur Ali who cited historical ground to show that Cachar never formed part of Bengal. He also argued that the case of Sylhet and Cachar was different as in case of Sylhet the people of the district wanted transfer but in case of Cachar the immigrants who outnumbered the indigenous people advocated the same. He also apprehended that if the same principle was to be applied in case of the Brahmaputra valley, the Bengal immigrants who were pouring into Assam in huge numbers might one day combine and demand the transfer of Assam to Bengal. Saadulla, a staunch opponent of Sylhet transfer, however, supported the resolution. Criticizing Faizur Ali's argument based on historical grounds, he argued that history was not followed in discussing the transfer of Sylhet in spite of its close connection with Assam for hundreds of years, as the Assamese people themselves supported the transfer of Sylhet. He urged that if self-determination was the guiding principle on earlier two occasions, the same must be followed in discussing Rashid Ali's Resolution.137 Sylhet Hindu members were not so serious about the transfer of Cachar and therefore, they did not take any interest in the resolution. As a result the resolution was defeated by 19 votes to 10.138 It is also observed that the Sylhet members supporting the Sylhet transfer remained neutral in case of this resolution recommending transfer of Cachar

136. For details please see the result of the voting on the resolution, in Ibid., p.126.
137. Debate on the motion ALCP in the Assam Gazette Part-VI, 1926, cited in Kar (n.8), p. 27.
138. Ibid.
as they felt that it could cause delay into the process of the transfer of Sylhet. Besides, they were also not keen to include Cachar along with Sylhet, some of whom even conceded the fact that historically Cachar was a part of Assam. 139

After Dowerah's resolution was passed in January, 1926, the Swarajists under the leadership of Faiznur Ali decided at a meeting held on 6 March, 1926 to withdraw from the Council following AICC resolution. After that very little about the transfer issue was heard in the Council in the coming two years. As per the report of the Government of Assam, the Muslim leaders of the Swarajist Party broke away following communal differences. 140 The Government in a letter dated 13 January, 1926 stated that the transfer issue might no longer be a popular one and that agitation against the same would grow with time. 141

2.8. **Counter-Agitation in the Surma Valley- Revulsion of the Muslim Opinion on the Sylhet Transfer Question:**

The period 1926-1928 witnessed a counter agitation throughout the Surma Valley demanding retention of Sylhet in Assam. Protest meetings against the decision of the Council and demanding retention of Sylhet were organised at different places of the district. In fact, after the resolution of 1926 had been adopted by the Council, there was a considerable revulsion of opinion among those members of the district who had voted for the transfer and the people began to oppose it tooth and nail. Huge public meetings were held at different places of Sylhet indicating resentment against the action of the Council and opposing the transfer. 142 On the 14th of January, 1926, a meeting was held at Karimganj under the auspices of the Anjuman- i- Islamia, presided over by Mohammad Bakht Mazumder, which was

139. PHA-II (n.95), p. 289.
142. For details on these meeting please see the ALCP, in The Assam Gazette Part-VI, October 3, 1928, pp. 722-726, 785-797.
attended by the representatives of all sections of the Muhammadan Community. In
the meeting a resolution was adopted which read: "This meeting adopts as
principle the employment of every legal, peaceful, legislative and constitutional
means and methods to see that the district of Sylhet is not transferred to
Bengal."¹⁴³

Another meeting of the representative Musalmans of the district of Sylhet
was held on 19th January, 1926 under the auspices of the district Anjuman-i-Isiamia
to which were affiliated all the sub-divisional Anjumans. The meeting presided
over by Maulavi Abdul Azim, adopted strong resolution against the transfer and
also congratulated the Karimganj Muslims for the resolution adopted on 14th January
in these words:

"This meeting congratulates the Muslims of the Karimganj sub-division on
their heartily and thoroughly opposing the proposed transfer of the district of
Sylhet to Bengal and on their adopting such resolutions as reflected the real state
of things and the true feeling of the Musalmans in their meeting of the 14th January
1926 under the Presidency of Khan Bahadur Haji Muhammad Bakht Mazumdar."¹⁴⁴

Such a feeling of opposition against the transfer so permeated throughout
the district among the Muhammadans so much so that even the student community
was said to have not left untouched. On the same date i.e. the 19th January, 1926,
an extraordinary meeting of the Sylhet Muslim Students Association was held in
which without touching the political issue the general feelings and opinions were
expressed against the Reunion move in these terms:

"The members of the Sylhet Muslim Students' Association in this meeting
assembled record their general alarm at the news that there is an apprehension of
the district of Sylhet being separated from Assam and united with Bengal, which
apprehension if come about is bound to irreparably impair the progress of Muslim

¹⁴³. Ibid., p. 724.
¹⁴⁴. Ibid.
education in this district which has been steadily thriving, hence, resolved, in the interest of education that the authorities be approached with the prayer that they may be pleased to see that the district may remain in Assam and thus help the cause of Muslim education in this district.”

The Student Association in fact felt that the progress achieved by the Community in the field of education since Sylhet was attached with Assam, might be hampered by reunification of the district with Bengal and therefore, opposed the proposed transfer of the district.\textsuperscript{146} After that many such meetings were held with the same motive i.e., to oppose the transfer of Sylhet in between January to April, 1926. One such meeting was held at Duhalia (Sunamganj) in the last week of January, 1926 which was said to be attended by several thousand people, and the proceedings of which were published in the Jugabani. Another was held at Sunamganj on 31st January, 1926 under the presidency of Dewan Goniur Reza Choudhry, which was attended by about 2,000 people. On the 12th, 15th and 18th February, 1926, memorials signed by about 4,000 Hindus and Muslims were sent to the Viceroy through the local government of Karimganj. Then in the middle of April, a monster public meeting was said to be held at Sunamganj the President of which was Dewan Dilaur Reza Choudhury and the same was said to be attended by about 15,000 people.\textsuperscript{147}

Besides these, many other meetings were also organised throughout the Surma Valley, protesting against the transfer and demanding retention of Sylhet in Assam.\textsuperscript{148} Thus, the Council decision of 1926 and public opinion differed fundamentally and by 1928, the Muslim opinion gradually crystallised into a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[145.] Ibid., pp. 724-25.
\item[146.] Ibid.
\item[147.] Ibid., p. 787.
\item[148.] For details please see Ibid., 787-88.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
united opposition against the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal.

2.9. Emergence of Clear Communal Tangle on the Sylhet Transfer Issue- Debate on the Motion of Bakth Mazumder:

In 1928, the two steps of great significance were taken by the Muslims. First, the Assam Provincial Muslim League affiliated to the All India Muslim League, was formed in April, 1928, at Shillong under the guidance and Control of the Surma Valley Muslims, and the Musalmans of the province submitted a memorandum to the Statutory Commission through the Provincial Muslim League unanimously recommending retention of Sylhet in Assam. Before that Assam did not have any branch of the League. Besides, the taking up of the question of Sylhet transfer for the first time by a Political Party like the Muslim League had a significance of its own. The second significant step was taken by Muhammad Bakht Mazumder in the Council, who moved a resolution recommending retention of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam.

Muhammad Bakht Mazumder of Sylhet moved the resolution in September, 1928, "That this Council recommends to the Government of Assam that they do represent to the proper authorities that the people of the districts of Sylhet and Cachar desire that these districts do remain incorporated in the province of Assam and they do not seek a transfer of these districts to Bengal".

Mazumder's main contention was that Sylhet would have better prospects in Assam than being transferred to Bengal. Citing examples he showed that the progress achieved by Sylhet since its incorporation in Assam, would not have been possible under Bengal administration. He also stated that the younger generation of the district would have greater and better chances in Assam than in Bengal. Such

149. Ibid., p. 722, also Kar(n.8), pp. 127-28.
151. Ibid., p. 713.
chances and prospects would be jeopardised, according to him, if Sylhet was transferred to Bengal. He did not spoke about Cachar separately as according to him, what was true of Sylhet was also true of Cachar.\textsuperscript{152}

This time a unified Muslim voice against the transfer was reflected in the debate on the resolution as all the Muslim members from both the Valleys supported the resolution. On the other hand, almost all the Hindu members opposed the same, and therefore, for the first time, a clear communal divide on the issue of Sylhet transfer was noticed in the Council debate.

Khan Bahadur Kutub Uddin Ahmed, the Home Member, placed the views of the Government of Assam in the matter and repeated the view expressed by the Government in 1925. He said that the position hitherto maintained by the Government on the matter was that although Sylhet would lose materially by the transfer, the Government would not oppose it if the people of the district declared in favour of the transfer, provided the status of the rest of the province was in no way impaired by the transfer. He also stated that the Government was not convinced after inquiries made, that it was the desire of the people of Sylhet to go to Bengal. The mass of the people were indifferent and the educated Muhammadan opinion was against the transfer. He also reiterated the Government stand that if the transfer of Sylhet was to carry with it any loss to Assam of the political privileges which it had been enjoying or was to deny to Assam any further privileges which might be granted to other major provinces, the Government must emphatically protest against the transfer. Besides, the Government of Assam, according to him, felt that if Sylhet was transferred, the people of Cachar and the Bengali-speaking people and Zamindars of Goalpara would also agitate to go to Bengal. He further declared that the Government Members were unanimous in supporting the resolution moved by Bakht Mazumder.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{152} For details please see Mahammad Bakht Majumdar's speech in Ibid., pp. 711-713.
\textsuperscript{153} Kutub Uddin Ahmed's speech in Ibid., pp. 715-16.
Basanta Kumar Das of Sylhet moved an amendment which originally stood in the name of Brajendra Narayan Choudhury, and the amended resolution read thus—

"That this council recommends to the Government of Assam that they do represent to the proper authorities after taking the votes of those who pay the Chaukidari or Municipal rates, the desire of the people of the district of Sylhet and Cachar regarding the transfer of these districts to Bengal". 154

In moving the amendment, Das challenged the main issue in the resolution that the people of Sylhet and Cachar do not want their districts be transferred to Bengal "as he wanted to know how did the mover come to know that it was the desire of the people without clearly stating how he ascertained it. Then since the passing of the resolution of January, 1926, Das stated, they did not come across any articulate opinion in the district and were not ready to accept that the people changed their views. Rejecting Kutubuddin Ahmad's view that the mass of the people were indifferent in the matter, he said that the masses took keen interest in the matter. In fact, the matter was settled with the Resolution of the Council and the verdict of the constituencies was never sought and therefore, according to him, it would not be correct on the part of any member to say that the people did not want incorporation of Sylhet and Cachar to Bengal, and if a resolution to that effect was passed it would be deceiving the people as well as the authorities mentioned in the resolution. For this, he suggested a referendum for ascertaining the views of the people and his amendment was intended to ask the House to pass a resolution to take a plebiscite of the people on the matter. 155

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155. Ibid., pp. 717-719.
2.9.A. **Views of Muslim Members:**

The dominant Muslim viewpoint at that point of time was voiced through Munawwarali of Sylhet who strongly opposed the amendment and supported the resolution. According to him, after the adoption of the resolution of 1926, there was a considerable revulsion of the opinion among those members who had voted for transfer and the people opposed it tooth and nail and huge public meetings were organised in Sylhet indicating resentment against the action of the Council and opposing the transfer of Sylhet. He then presented specific accounts of some of those meetings, in some of which he himself was present, and the proceedings of which were, according to him, published in the newspapers. He stated that the Muslims of the province submitted a memorandum to the Statutory Commission through the Provincial Muslim League formed in April, 1928 at Shillong, unanimously recommending retention of Sylhet in Assam. He then cited evidence to show that in January, 1926 the Anjuman- i- Islamia and the Sylhet Muslim Association opposed the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal.¹⁵⁶

Munawwarali also raised some other vital points which did not justify the transfer. First, he opined that the application of the principle of linguistic redistribution of the provinces could not be applied in Assam as out of the population of 76,00000 and odd of the province 25,40,000 spoke Bengali and 17,25,000 spoke Assamese. Of the Bengali-speaking, about 12,00000 spoke Bengali in the Assam Valley. The Bengali-speaking people were so scattered throughout the province that it would be very difficult to separate them. Then if the linguistic principle once accepted the claims of Cachar and Goalpara could not be resisted and if Cachar and Goalpara were to go along with Sylhet the population of the province would be so reduced then it might not be possible to prevent the

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¹⁵⁶ Munawwarali’s speech in the Council, Ibid., pp. 722-724.
dismemberment of Assam as a major province.\textsuperscript{157}

Second, from the economic viewpoint, he said that Bengal was already a deficit province with all sources of revenue had already been exhausted and he was uncertain as to what would be the position of Sylhet which itself was a deficit district if it was tagged on to a deficit province along with Cachar.\textsuperscript{158} Third, he also touched the political aspect and on the basis of figures showed that the people of Assam had a much greater representation in the Council than those in Bengal.\textsuperscript{159} Then he referred to the most important Muslim aspect of the question and said:

"We are not prepared to go to Bengal because we have an affinity with the Muslims of the Assam Valley; those people can not live in a hopelessly microscopic minority. This is one question. Then there is another that is a grave danger to Bengal. The danger is this. Bengal which has a bare Moslem Majority will lose its majority and sink into a Muhammadan minority province……..It will become a Muhammadan minority province with Goalpara and Cachar, with Singhbhum, Manbhum and Purnea, with an overwhelming majority of Hindu element. In Bengal the Muhammadans are only 53%. Therefore this question also appeals to the Muslims and they are prepared to take a long view of things."\textsuperscript{160} He therefore, stressed that looking from viewpoint of the Communal interest of the Muslims, there was no case for Sylhet and Cachar going back to Bengal but there was very strong case in favour of Sylhet and Cachar remaining in Assam.\textsuperscript{161}

The resolution also got vigorous support from some other Muslim members of both the Valleys. Keramat Ali, a Brahmaputra Valley member supporting the resolution, stated that in 1926, the resolution seeking transfer of Sylhet to Bengal,

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p. 726.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., p. 727.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid; Speaking in the Council Munawwarali stated: "In Assam 6,900,000 people send 39 members to the Council, i.e., 175,000 of people send one number to the Council, whereas in Bengal 46,700,000 people send 114 members, i.e., four lakhs send one member."
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., pp. 727-728.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., p. 728.
was supported by the Assam Valley members except some Muhammadan members, as majority of the members from the Surma Valley, both Hindus and Muslims wanted the transfer. At that time although some Muhammadan members of the Assam Valley like Saadulla wanted retention of Sylhet and appealed to the Sylhet Muslims to consider the Muslim aspect of the question but did not get unanimous support from the latter. But now as the Muslims of the Surma Valley changed their opinion and wanted to remain with Assam, he thought that they should not stand in their way and should support them and therefore, he supported the resolution. He also informed that not only the Muslim members from Sylhet, but even some elected Hindu members were also against the transfer and a resolution in the name of Ramani Mohan Das, opposing the transfer was also tabled. He then criticised Basanta Kumar Das for suggesting a referendum as according to him, Basanta Babu feared that majority of the members would vote in favour of the resolution otherwise why the same person did not suggest any thing like that in 1926 when majority of the members were in favour of the transfer.162

Sayidur Rahman, another member from the Brahmaputra Valley, opined that the issue should be decided by the members of Sylhet and Cachar and said that he would be too glad to refrain from voting in the matter and also expect other members except those from these districts to do likewise.163 According to him, as the composite Muslim population in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar together was in majority, the preponderance of weight must attach to the opinion of the Muslims.164 As regards the opinion of the Muhammadan Community he stated: "Sir, the Mussalmans of Sylhet and Cachar I am afraid do not want the transfer, for what is the psychology in the defeat of the Muhammadan members who voted

163. Sayidur Rahman’s speech in the Council. Ibid., pp. 782-83.
164. Ibid., p. 782. According to Sayidur Rahman, the population of Sylhet and Cachar together was 3,068, 569 out of which the Muslims numbered 1,644,200.
for the transfer during the last debate? The present Muhammadan members of this Council who are now the representatives of the entire Muhammadan Community are unanimous for its retention"\(^{165}\). Thus, according to Sayidur Rahman, the opinions expressed by the Muhammadan members truly reflected the voice of the community on the matter.

Ali Haidar Khan of Sylhet supported the resolution and presented a concise statement of a number of meetings held at different places of Sylhet between January to April, 1926, and those meetings were attended by large number of people, according to him, opposing the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. He also responded to the query of those members who questioned the representative character of the Muslim League of which Munawwarali was the President by presenting a detailed information about the composition of the League Council and declared the League to be most influential and representative Muslim organisation in the province.\(^{166}\)

Strong support to the resolution also came from Saadulla, who from the very beginning was opposed to the transfer of Sylhet. Tracing the history of the movement for reunion of Sylhet with Bengal since 1874, he said that till 1911 the Muslim opinion on the issue was divided but since 1912 the majority of the Muhammadans of the district of Sylhet were opposed to the reunion of Sylhet with Bengal. Referring to the resolution of 1926, he stated that it was "manouvered" into a majority with the support of the Assam Valley members by adding the condition that the status of the rest of province would not be hampered by the transfer. He also referred to the report of the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet who had reported, as referred earlier, that weight of Hindu opinion was in favour of the transfer and the weight of the Muhammadan opinion was in opposition to that. He

\(^{165}\) Ibid.
\(^{166}\) Ali Haidar Khan's Speech in the Council, Ibid., pp. 785-88.
then informed the House by citing evidences that a small but appreciable percentage of the Hindus also did not want to go to Bengal and drew the conclusion that the majority of the Muhammadans who formed 60% (sixty percent) of the population of the district and also a small section of the Hindus shared the view that Sylhet should not be transferred. Regarding the opinion of the members from the Surma Valley, he stated clearly that all the Muhammadan members from the districts of Sylhet and Cachar were in favour of the resolution. Finally, he also touched the most important political question by reiterating the Government position expressed earlier that the future status of the province of Assam i.e. its continuance as a Governor's province would not be guaranteed if Sylhet was transferred. 167

2.9.B. **Views of Hindu Members**

Paresh Lal Shome Choudhury of Sylhet was one of the most vocal opponents of the resolution. According to him, the resolution was inspired from outside by which he meant that the Government of Assam's letter dated 13th January, 1926 in which it was stated that the transfer might no longer be the popular will and that the agitation against the transfer would grow as the time went on, laid the germ for the resolution. 168 Brajendra Narayan Choudhury was another important opponent who challenged the claim of Munawwarali regarding the change of opinion of the Sylhet people on the transfer and said that nothing was heard in the press about the Muslim opposition to the transfer not even in the most communal paper like 'Yugabani' which was a Muslim organ, according to him. 169 Then regarding the change of opinion of the Muslim members, he stated that it was not the opinion of the whole Community but of some members of the Council and leaders of the

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Community. He stated,

"And if we analyse the psychology of the Muslim members and the leaders, we find that they are hangers on and most of them had their sons, or their nephews or their sons-in-law and all sorts of relations looking up to the Government for employment. They think they could depend more upon backdoor influence in Assam than in Bengal". Speaking about the psychology of moving this resolution he said, "my suspicion is that these members must have got some information which is denied to us from which they expect that they have very good prospects in Assam. The prospects are not for the people or the public". 170

The Assamese Hindu members also opposed the resolution which was reflected from the speeches of Kashinath Saikia, Kuladhar Chaliha, Rohini Kumar Choudhury and Sadananda Dowerah. 171 Sadananda Dowerah asserted that the Assam Valley members' support to the transfer was not out of jealousy as had been suggested in some places, but inspired by the feeling that their progress was unnecessarily being hampered by the presence of Sylhet in Assam. 172 Such feeling was earlier expressed by Dowerah as well in 1926 while moving the resolution on the transfer of Sylhet.

Thus, the Hindu members in general of both the Valleys supported the resolution except Amarnath Roy, Hirendra Chandra Chakrabatti and Nabin Chandra Bardoloi. Amaranth Roy a nominated member from Sylhet, felt that it would be opposed to the best interests of the people of Sylhet if the district was transferred to Bengal. 173 Hirendra Chandra Chakrabatti, the representative from Cachar, stated that the people of Cachar always wanted to stay with Sylhet and if majority of the people of Sylhet wanted to stay with Assam, he thought it proper to be guided by

170. Ibid.
171. For details on these speeches, please see Debate on the Resolution. Ibid., pp. 728-784.
172. Dowerah's speech in Ibid., p. 784.
the wishes of the majority of his sister district. Nabin Chandra Bardoloi clearly stated that he had no problem in Sylhet remaining in Assam if majority of that district decided to do so. He however, suggested ascertaining of public opinion in settling the matter as he was not certain about the views of the majority.

After lots of debate, the amendment moved by Basanta Kumar Das seeking vote of the people in settling the issue, was put to vote and lost by 12 votes to 29. All 12 supporters of the amendment were Hindus while all the Muslim members present voted against the same. The substantive motion i.e. the original resolution moved by Bakht Mazumder was then put and was adopted. As all the opponents of the amendment were the supporters of the original resolution it was obvious that the resolution was passed without any difficulty. After passing of the resolution, the Government of Assam informed the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928 that "the resolution of the last Council (1926) has been overruled by the recent resolution; the opinion of the province now expressed through its elected representatives in the Legislative Council is opposed to the transfer of Sylhet. The last resolution has of course considerably modified the position. Previously the Government held that although they themselves did not consider that the transfer of Sylhet was in the interest of Sylhet they were not opposed to it. Now the people through their elected representatives have declared against the transfer and in view of the present position the Government are in a position to state that they themselves are opposed to the transfer of the district".

The Government of Assam raised the Transfer issue before the Simon Commission during its visit to Assam in 1929. In its note to the Commission, the Government reiterated its earlier apprehension of serious difficulties, administrative

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174. Hirendra Chandra Chakrabatti’s speech in Ibid., pp. 792-93.
175. Nabin Chandra Bordoloi in Ibid., pp. 806-07.
176. Please see the result of the voting on the amendment and the resolution in Ibid, p. 812.
and political, that might be caused by the transfer of Sylhet, as well as to the status of Assam in case its area and population were reduced. It was also held that any dismemberment of the province would imperil its existence. Even in Sylhet itself, it was stated, more and more people were coming forward to oppose the transfer. The Government, therefore, refrained from recommending any change in the boundaries of the province. The Simon Commission in its report did not mention any territorial changes affecting the boundaries of Assam.

2.10. **Post-1928 Scenario**:  

Although the Surma Valley veered more and more towards Status Quo after 1928, "the Brahmaputra Valley continued its clamour for separation of the Sylhet district". During 1931-1937, many representative organisations of the Assamese people like the Assam Association, Assam Valley Political Conference, Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha, Asamiya Deka Dal, etc. repeatedly raised the question of transfer and strongly pressed for the transfer of the district. A resolution was also moved by Nilambar Dutta of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Council demanding transfer of Sylhet excluding Jaintia Parganas to Bengal.

In moving the resolution, Nilambar Dutta stated that as long as Sylhet remained in Assam, there was no hope for the Assamese people as there would somehow or other come up a Valley question, and some people of Sylhet who wanted to be in high positions of Government were against going to Bengal as they saw a chance to exploit the Assamese people. Speaking of the internal feeling of the Assamese people, he confessed that they were terribly afraid of Sylhet remaining in Assam for they saw that they would be extinct as a separate race if Sylhet was continued with Assam. He urged for a province of Assam without

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178. PHA-II, pp. 290-91; also Kar(n.8), pp. 132-33.
179. PHA-II, p. 291.
180. For details please see Ibid., pp. 291-94.
181. ALCP in The Assam Gazette Part-VI, 1932, p. 640 onwards (debate on the resolution.).
Sylhet to keep the Assamese people as an individual unit among the races of India.\(^{182}\)

Munawwarali of Sylhet expressed strong opposition to the views expressed by Nilambar Dutta and said that on the basis of the principle of self-determination, a part of the province could not be driven out without the consent of the part. Then he responded to Nilambar Dutta's plea of continuance of the Assamese people as a distinct unit with the transfer of Sylhet by asking whether it would be possible to drive away the Bengali-speaking people from the province even after the transfer of Sylhet, as the number of Bengali-speaking people in Assam Valley, according to him, was almost equal to those who spoke Assamese.\(^{183}\)

Keramat Ali of the Brahmaputra Valley referring to the view of an Assamese Hindu member, stated that the assurance of good treatment of the Brahmaputra Valley Muslims by the Hindus in the event of Sylhet transfer should not be made a ground for asking the Surma Valley Muslims to go to Bengal even if they did not want. Regarding the Muslim opinion in the Brahmaputra Valley, he said that the Assam valley Muslims would not be so cruel as to force the Muslims of the other Valley to go to Bengal against their wish.\(^{184}\)

Opposition to the resolution also came from some other Brahmaputra Valley Muslim members like Nuruddin Ahmed and Abdul Majid Ziaoshams. Nuruddin Ahmed although accepted the view of monopoly of the Sylhet people in Government employment for the reason of Sylhet being more advanced than rest of the province, however, did not think it proper for the Assamese people to ask the Sylhet people to go to Bengal on that point alone. Seeing that many members from his own Valley were opposed to the transfer, Nilambar Dutta ultimately withdrew his resolution.\(^{185}\) However, the debate clearly reflected the inter-Valley,

\(^{182}\) Ibid.
\(^{183}\) Ibid.
\(^{184}\) Ibid.
\(^{185}\) Ibid.
inter-community clash on the issue.

Although the issue of Sylhet Separation attracted attention of the representative institutions of the Assamese people in the next few years, as already stated, but some other broader issues like Civil Disobedience Movement, Round Table Conferences, Communal Award, Government of India Act, 1935 etc. subsided the Sylhet transfer issue to some extent. The Government of India Act, 1935 introduced Provincial Autonomy which was followed in Assam by the ushering in of a popular Government after the elections of 1937 under the leadership of Saadulla, as the Congress Party being the largest single Party refused to accept office because its central leadership decided against acceptance of office.\(^\text{186}\) The Party, however, resolved to fight the Sylhet separation issue on the floor of the House. However, the issue did not come up for discussion in the Assam Assembly till 1939.\(^\text{187}\) In replying a question on the matter, the Premier Saadulla replied that the Government did not propose to take any action on the issue of Sylhet transfer and that the attitude and action of the Government would depend on the future circumstances which could not be foreseen.\(^\text{188}\)

It is important to note here that the Muslim Ministers of Saadulla Cabinet at that time including the Premier himself were all the members of the Muslim League which by that time demanded Independent Muslim States in the North-Western and North-Eastern zones of India in terms of famous Lahore Resolution of 23rd March, 1940.\(^\text{189}\) Although the question of Sylhet transfer figured prominently in course of debates on establishment of a University or a High Court, the Sylhet Transfer issue assumed an altogether new dimension in the coming days when League began to demand the inclusion of the Province of Assam in the proposed Muslim state of

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\(^{186}\) Kar(n.8), pp. 135-136.  
\(^{187}\) PHA-II, pp. 294-95.  
\(^{188}\) Kar(n.8), p. 136.  
\(^{189}\) Ibid, p. 136.
'Pakistan'. From there onwards the province of Assam in general and the district of Sylhet in particular, got mixed up and became parts of all India Muslim geo-politics and was seen as a part of the partition politics. Under the circumstances, the opinion of the Hindus as well the Muslims on the Transfer of Sylhet took reverse turn. The Hindus fighting for long for reunion with Bengal now wanted its retention in Assam and the Muslims in majority who supported Sylhet's retention clearly since 1928, anted its transfer so as to make it a component part of the eastern zone of the proposed state of 'Pakistan'. The problem was settled finally before the advent of independence when Sylhet (barring three and half thanas) went to Pakistan as a result of a referendum held in July, 1947 in course of the partition of the Country. The circumstances leading to the Referendum and the League demand for Assam's inclusion in Pakistan will be dealt with in details in another chapter dealing with partition politics and its impact on Assam.

2.11. An Assesment of the Sylhet-Bengal Reunion Movement & the Role of Muslims:

From the above analysis of the role of Muslims in the Sylhet-Bengal Reunion Movement, it may be pointed out that although initially it was supported jointly by the Hindus and Muslims, gradually the Muslim opinion got divided and by 1928 the Muslim opinion got crystallized into a united opposition to the transfer of Sylhet. The Hindus of the district in majority supported the movement. From 1874-1928, the issue continued to surface from time to time and since 1928 its intensity as a movement of the people of Sylhet was on decline and from that time the issue was raised more by the Assamese people than the people Sylhet. The

movement was not a continuous one and there were breaks and revivals. It was fought more on the floor of the Council and views of different Communities were reflected through their representatives in course of debates in the Council from 1924-1928. In course of the debate on the first resolution recommending transfer in 1924 which was carried, the Muslim opinion seemed to be clearly divided. Of those favouring transfer, five were Muslims and were all from the Surma Valley. Of the eighteen opponents, six were Muslims, three from each Valley. Then, the resolution of 1926 was also carried by 26 votes to 12. Out of the ten Muslim members participating in the voting, four voted for the motion and six voted against the same. Thus, the Muslim opinion seemed to be clearly divided till 1926.

However, the resolution of 1928 recommending retention of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam moved by a Sylhet Muslim got unanimous support of all the Muslim members. In fact, the discussion in course of the debate revealed that in between 1926 to 1928 a significant change occurred in the Muslim opinion on the issue and gradually majority of the Muslims began to support retention of the district in Assam which got reflected from the views of the Muslim members from Sylhet who got unanimous support from the Muslim members of the Brahmaputra Valley.

In course of the movement, it is seen that the Muslim viewpoint as expressed through their representatives was mainly influenced along with other factors, by a sense of communal solidarity. First, they thought they would be in majority in Bengal rather than remaining in Assam as a minority and therefore, supported the transfer. Subsequently, as convinced by Saadulla and other Brahmaputra Valley members, they could understand that they could not increase the proportion Muslim majority of Bengal by any remarkable percentage, but could play a dominant role in Assam politics supported by the Brahmaputra Valley Muslims. Besides, another point which appealed significantly to the Muslim members of the Surma Valley was that if Sylhet was transferred, the Brahmaputra
Valley Muslims would be in an extremely disadvantageous position and might be deprived of political privileges hitherto enjoyed by them because of the numerical strength contributed by the Surma Valley Muslims. That is why Muslims gradually became opponents of the transfer in large numbers and by 1928 the opinion of the whole community seemed to get crystallised into a united opposition to the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal.

Thus, it may be derived that although the Muslims were initially guided by some other factors along with the sense of communal consciousness or communal solidarity but gradually such consciousness became dominant over all other factors and by 1928 the whole question of Sylhet transfer appeared to be one between the two communities although initially it was more of a Valley question.